

## **Reading Downtown Revitalization Observations**

Presented to the Reading Economic Development Committee

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## Introduction & Purpose

Reading is blessed with an active and attractive downtown. Downtown Reading maintains a comparatively high level of retail occupancy and enjoys the anchoring presence of a highly successful community grocery store. Several institutional and office users, including the town government, a major post office, and multiple financial institutions, as well as a busy commuter rail station provide daytime activity throughout the downtown. A handful of new restaurants and specialty stores have increased evening activity downtown as well.

Not willing to merely accept these assets, Reading continues to take proactive steps to enhance and improve its downtown. A major capital improvement project in partnership with the Massachusetts Highway Department will soon transform Main Street. New mixed-use zoning has been adopted to encourage additional development and increase activity. The Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) is assisting Reading with a market assessment report focused on Downtown. The Town Administration has been authorized to begin studying parking management options including consideration of the feasibility of constructing a new parking structure to serve Downtown.

The 2005 Master Plan for the Town of Reading listed "Improve Downtown" as the number one economic development goal. Consistent with the Master Plan, the newly appointed Economic Development Committee has identified the following as their top economic development objective:

Improve the quality of life for Reading residents by increasing the available retail, restaurants, and other amenities in town, particularly in the Downtown

Given the primacy of downtown revitalization for the Town of Reading and the Economic Development Committee, this document is intended to complement the broader Economic Development Strategy with more detailed discussion of opportunities and recommendations for Downtown Reading.

## Reading Master Plan

The 2005 Reading Master Plan listed the following observations, goals, and objectives for the revitalization of Downtown Reading.

### Downtown Revitalization

Reading's Downtown enjoys a low vacancy rate, significant public and private investment and a fairly diverse mix of commercial uses. However, the lack of parking is the major impediment to retail or mixed-use development. Also, mixed-use is currently prohibited by zoning by-law in the commercial areas. Improving the Downtown can be achieved primarily through good urban design. This includes improved streetscape, enhanced and enforced parking, more pleasing building facades, easier and safer pedestrian street crossing, and attraction of first rate restaurants and vibrant niche retailers.

### Goal 1 Improve Downtown

#### Objectives:

- A. To enhance the economic development of Downtown, the CPDC will develop the appropriate mixed-use zoning changes and present them to Town Meeting for approval.
- B. Complete the planned streetscape modifications developed over the last 8 years and which is currently on the MassHighway Transportation Improvement Plan (TIP) for fiscal year 2006 funding. This will provide additional parking, easier crossing of Main Street to improve access to the east side shops, provide improved traffic circulation for the Haven Street – Gould Street areas and generally beautify the Main Street area from the Common to Washington Street.
- C. Investigate multi-level structured parking facilities in the parking area behind CVS, perhaps in conjunction with medical, commercial and/or residential facilities. Other areas for potential open or structured parking should also be investigated for a multi-leveled structure, with some consideration for pedestrian, bicycle or alternative transportation.
- D. Encourage specific beautification projects such as façade improvement, window flower boxes, artwork on graffiti-prone walls and alleys, and shrubs and plantings for screening where needed. These to be accomplished by shop owners, landlords, church groups, service clubs, youth groups, and other volunteer organizations with assistance from the Town where appropriate.
- E. Apply for grants from all appropriate State and Federal programs to extend the streetscape program to the Haven Street/High Street/Depot areas.

## Observations

On Friday, April 20, Town Manager Peter Hechenbleikner and members of the Economic Development Committee accompanied me on a tour of Downtown Reading. It was a warm and sunny afternoon after a colder and wetter than normal April and this was school vacation week, ideal circumstances for people of all ages to enjoy a pedestrian-friendly downtown setting. This provided an excellent opportunity to observe strengths, challenges, and opportunities for improvement toward the goal of achieving an active and vital downtown. The following observations stem from the tour.

### Major Attractors

Downtown commercial districts, like malls and other retail areas, are only successful if there is sufficient market activity to ensure financial success for the retailers. There are essentially two types of retail businesses, destination retailers and convenience or impulse retailers. Destination retailers include the anchor departments stores in most malls, supermarkets that anchor most strip centers, and restaurants and stores that offer products or services of a quality or type that is unique in the area. While trade areas for destination retailers vary, their customers will generally make a planned trip to the patronize that particular business.

Impulse retailers, include convenience stores, gas stations, fast food restaurants, pharmacies, and many of the smaller stores in most malls and shopping centers. These businesses provide products and services that are or are perceived to be available at similar levels of quality from many locations within a trade area. These businesses generally cannot depend on customers making a special trip to patronize a particular establishment. Instead, they must rely on convenience to the customer who is drawn to their location for some other reason. Many, including gas stations and urban chain coffee houses, rely on being located proximate to high traffic locations (highways or urban downtown street corners, respectively). Others rely on being located near destination retailers, as is common in most malls and shopping plazas. Still others rely on being located near major attractors that are not necessarily retailers, including tourist-oriented businesses near visitor attractions, insurance agents near motor vehicle registration offices, and sports bars near arenas.

Most retailers that populate and form the street-level fabric of successful downtowns are not destination retailers. They are usually reliant on customers drawn by major attractors and destination retail anchors. As the downtowns become more and more successful, the pedestrian friendly environment itself becomes a major attractor as is seen in Portsmouth, NH and Newburyport, MA, for example.

Currently Downtown Reading is not an attractor unto itself as the above-named communities are. However, Reading is blessed with several attractors including destination retailers which form an excellent foundation for revitalization.

- The Atlantic Supermarket appears to draw the most customers to Downtown Reading as a destination retailer and it has the potential to perform the same function that supermarkets play as anchors in strip shopping centers, boosting the sales of adjacent businesses. To successfully leverage the market as an anchor however, other businesses

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need to be located where they are visible and conveniently accessed from the entrance to the market. Unfortunately, since most customers appear to access the market from the parking lot behind, and few other businesses are visible from this lot, a significant amount of the potential trade benefit for other businesses may not be effectively captured. Signage in the parking lot with logos and names of other Downtown businesses, and the distribution of promotional fliers in grocery bags (with permission from the market) may be some simple short-term steps to increase the Downtown's ability to leverage grocery shoppers.

- The MBTA rail station draws approximately eight hundred commuters daily to Downtown Reading by car and presumably on foot from nearby neighborhoods as well. Unfortunately, the train station is at the edge of Downtown, separated from the business areas and parking is spread out linearly along High Street. These factors mean that this potential population is not drawn toward businesses along Haven and Main Streets to the degree that might be desired. Textured crosswalks, bulb-outs, and other physical improvements to enhance pedestrian connection between the train station and the end of Haven Street may be beneficial.
- The Post Office appears to draw a significant number of people to Downtown. This building is well-positioned to convey its visitors to other sites due to its location in the center of the downtown business district. Unfortunately, surface parking lots and office uses occupy many of the parcels immediately surrounding the post office, limiting the potential for post office users to be drawn to other businesses in Downtown.
- There are a series of smaller businesses along the west side of Main Street from Haven Street to the Town Hall that have developed some capacity to act as destinations at varying times of day due to unique offerings. These include the Venetian Moon Restaurant, The Wine Shop, Christopher's Restaurant, Goodhearts and Sense of Wonder.

### The Spine

Collectively, these major attractors form a linear path beginning at Town Hall extending south along Main Street to include the square formed by the intersection with Haven Street, then west down Haven Street and terminating at the Commuter Rail Station. This forms a core spine which can constitute a foundation for the revitalization of downtown. Efforts to enhance the pedestrian experience and promote commercial activity in Downtown Reading will be most successful if they build on this existing foundation.

A compelling pedestrian experience in a downtown setting is driven by two important factors: activity and visual interest. Humans are inherently social animals. We are drawn to other people and to places that have been activated by the presence of others. We are also drawn to places where there are things to look at. As a result, most people are drawn to a downtown street lined with active uses and interesting things to look at, particularly along the sidewalks from three feet to eight feet above the ground. Not surprisingly, the best way to achieve this is to line the sidewalks with active retail uses, characterized by well-designed storefront window displays and outdoor and window seating for restaurants and cafes (nothing is more interesting to look at than other people). By contrast, surface parking lots, building walls without windows, etc. will detract from the pedestrian experience.

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As a result, it is very important that Reading work to energize the spine with more activity and visual interest. Some specific action steps that should be considered include:

- Redevelop the parking lots that front on Haven Street (a short-term interim step would be to improve the visual variety and interest to the landscaping along the sidewalks at these lots). Prioritize these developments to increase the continuity of the spine.
- Increasing the proportion of ground floor uses along the spine that are active in nature
- Allow parking along both sides of all streets in this area so that pedestrians on the sidewalk are protected from the moving traffic on the street by the parked cars. For this reason, delivery and drop-off zones should be limited (or eliminated) from the spine.
- Narrow pedestrian crossings along the spine, particularly at the intersection of Gould and Haven Streets, and provide textured or colored crosswalks.
- Improve the comfort and safety for pedestrians crossing High Street from the train station to Haven Street
- Widen sidewalks where possible and allow for sidewalk seating for restaurants and cafes.
- Encourage new developments to include residential uses on upper floors to increase the nighttime activity in the area
- Manage parking so that employees, residents, and other non-customers must walk along the sidewalks to travel from the parking to their destinations
- During the review process encourage new developments to increase the proportion of fenestration (windows) on sidewalk-facing ground floors
- Work with banks and institutional users to redevelop underutilized ground floor space in their buildings as cafes and other functions that are more engaging to downtown pedestrians. Wainwright Bank's new branch being built in Dorchester may be a good model.

It would be desirable to apply these types of improvements to all areas of the Downtown. In some cases, this is possible. In others prioritization is important since revitalization typically proceeds incrementally. The revitalization process can be accelerated with proper management though.

Studies by Boston-based Goody Clancy and others have observed that it takes 1000 households to support one block of urban main street business development. In more urban setting, these 1000 households come from dense housing in surrounding areas, typically within walking distance of the main street block. Several residential areas of Reading are very close and well-connected to Downtown by sidewalks. There are also existing residential properties in the downtown, including a multi-family apartment complex, and the new mixed-use zoning will wisely allow for new residential uses on upper floors of developments in the downtown.

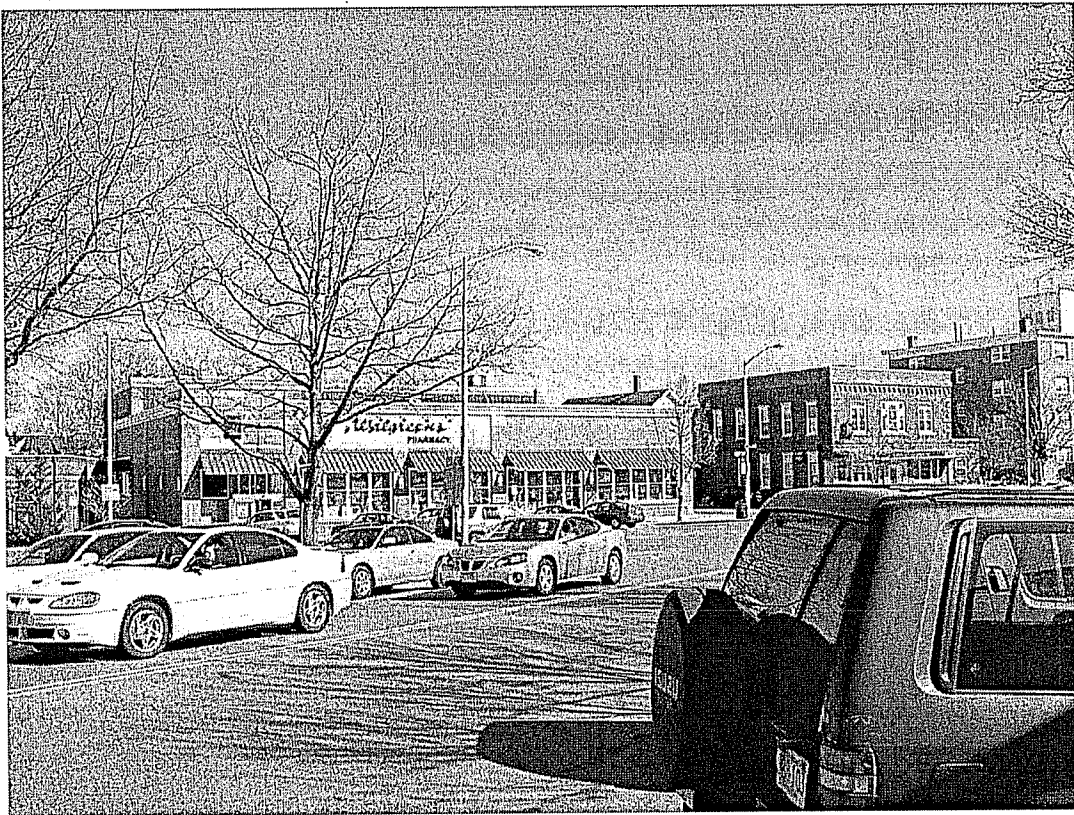
Collectively, these sources may generate 1000 households, but are unlikely to generate more than 1000. Given that the Main Street/Haven Street spine represents at least three and possibly as many as five blocks, at least 3000 households may be needed to support it. Reading households have higher incomes and greater purchasing power than those in the urban areas Goody

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Clancy studied and additional customers will drive to Downtown Reading from other areas.

Nevertheless, the available market currently will not support the commercialization of the entire Business B Zoning District in Downtown Reading right away. Instead, it can support either the infilling of a few core blocks completely or the spread of some additional commercial activity sparsely throughout the entire district. If the focus is placed on the spine outlined above first and that area is revitalized well, it will create the impression of a highly successful business district and provide a compelling experience for people who shop along these blocks. As these blocks succeed, their success will draw more people to the Downtown, expanding the market, and ultimately supporting the expansion of the vital commercial district well beyond what the local population could support as has been the case in Portsmouth, NH. If instead the existing market is dispersed throughout the district, the critical mass of activity that spurs future growth may never materialize.

### Site-Specific Observations



This new pharmacy is comparatively well-designed for a downtown setting. The building is built to the side walk, with an entrance and multiple display windows directly facing the sidewalk at elevations that work well for pedestrians. It could be improved if one could see into the store through more of the windows.

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In contrast, this building is designed for a more suburban setting. The parking area separates pedestrians on the sidewalk from the entrances to the ground floor businesses limiting visibility, interest, safety, and access. The architecture of the building also highlights the second floor and the structural system rather than the storefronts which should be the focus in a downtown setting.

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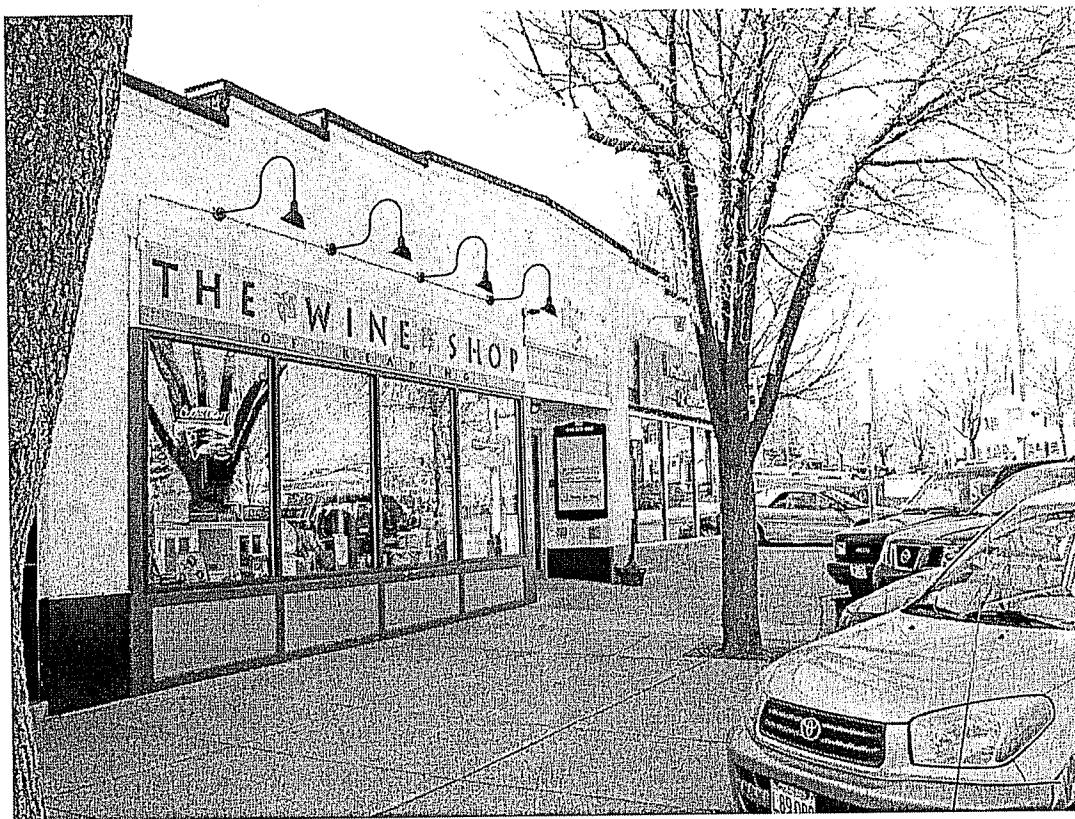




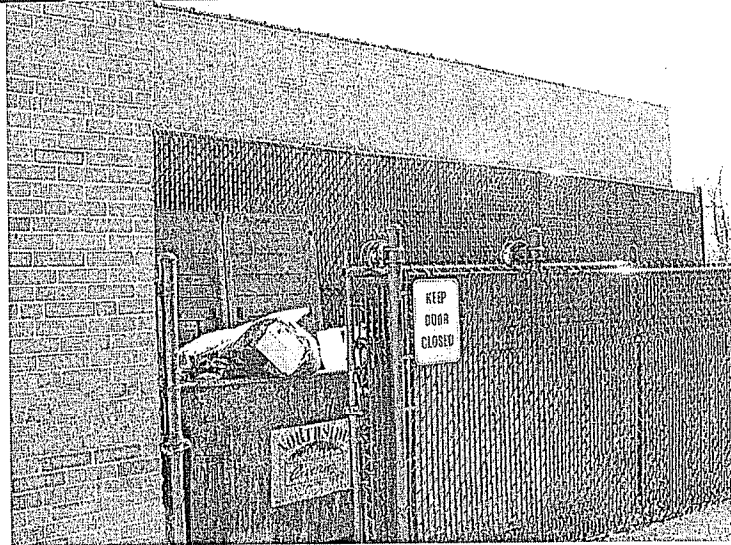
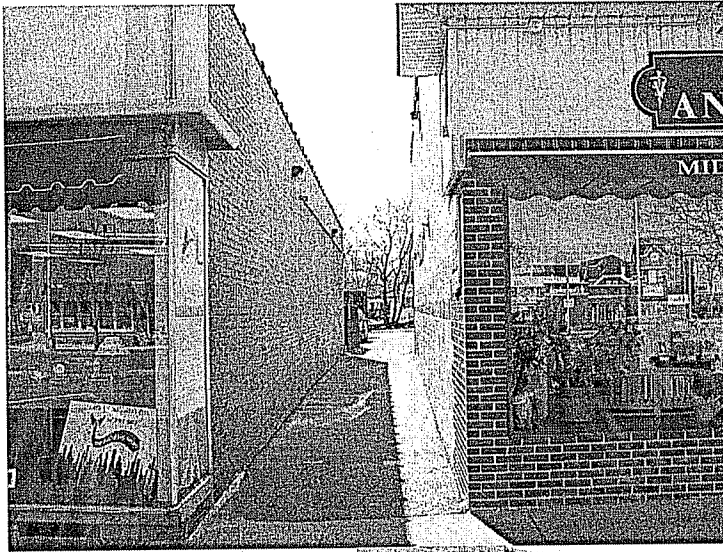
This alley is primary vehicular entrance to the central parking area. To encourage usage and awareness of the parking area, it should be well-marked, attractive, and visible from the main streets. A well-designed entrance structure that incorporates the universal "P" parking sign could address these issues for limited cost.

Plans have been filed to redevelop the fire-damaged building on the right.

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The Wine Shop and Venetian Moon of several excellent examples of the types of businesses that can thrive in a contemporary downtown setting. Downtowns may not always be competitive with strip shopping centers and malls for automotive convenience or well-marked familiar chain stores. However, unique and locally-owned business which emphasize quality products and high levels of customer service will draw customers to a downtown. Restaurants, bars, and service businesses which provide experience to the customer can both benefit from and strengthen the ambiance of a pedestrian-oriented downtown setting.



This alley is the public pedestrian access between the public parking lot and Main Street. Such a connection should be welcoming and convey a sense of safety, comfort, and interest and be thought of as one would view a public sidewalk along Main Street. Trash facilities should obviously be relocated. Alternate paving materials and painting the adjacent building walls a consistent light color would be an improvement. Arches at both ends could help pedestrians recognize this as the connection to Main Street. More and more attractive lighting would substantially improve the sense of safety and overall appearance after dark.

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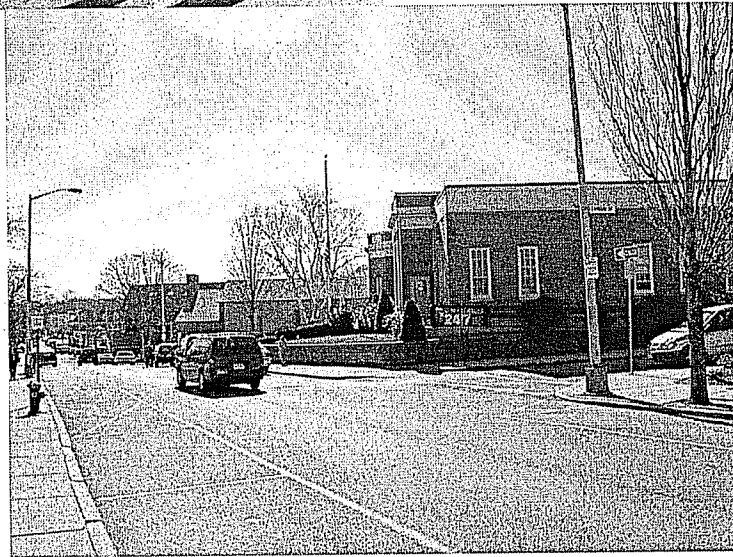
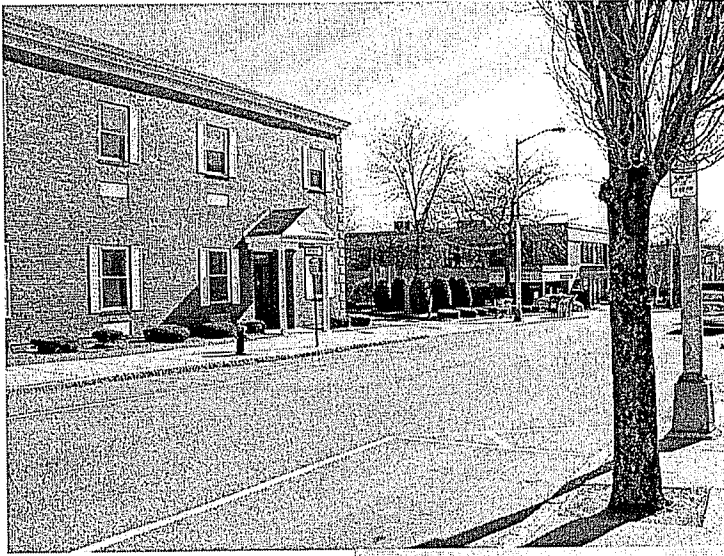
As discussed elsewhere in this report, Downtown Reading enjoys ample public parking and it is generally located in appropriate places, including parallel and angle parking on the main shopping streets and rear lots, like this one. The design challenge with rear parking lots is to present an attractive visual setting for the customer, while simultaneously providing for the loading and refuse facilities that are needed to allow businesses to function. In this case, landscaping within the parking lot and along the edges of the lot, could provide an alternate focus to distract from blank rear walls and service facilities.



This building is an excellent historic example of a well-designed downtown building. Reading is fortunate that it anchors a very prominent corner. The scale and massing of this structure is ideal for downtown Reading. The storefronts are well-proportioned to support the pedestrian experience. Unfortunately, the bank dominates the majority of the storefronts, which limits the visual interest and variety for the pedestrian that might come from retail displays or café seating in a restaurant window.

The crosswalks pose some challenges at this location and elsewhere in downtown Reading. Their length and lack of visual prominence suggests to both pedestrians and motorists that automobiles have the right-of-way, which is neither legally accurate nor desirable in a downtown setting. Narrowing the crossings with bulb-outs at street corners and use of alternate paving materials including pavers or colored cast-in-place concrete would be beneficial. These changes may be incorporated into the planned Main Street improvement project that MassHighway will be implementing.

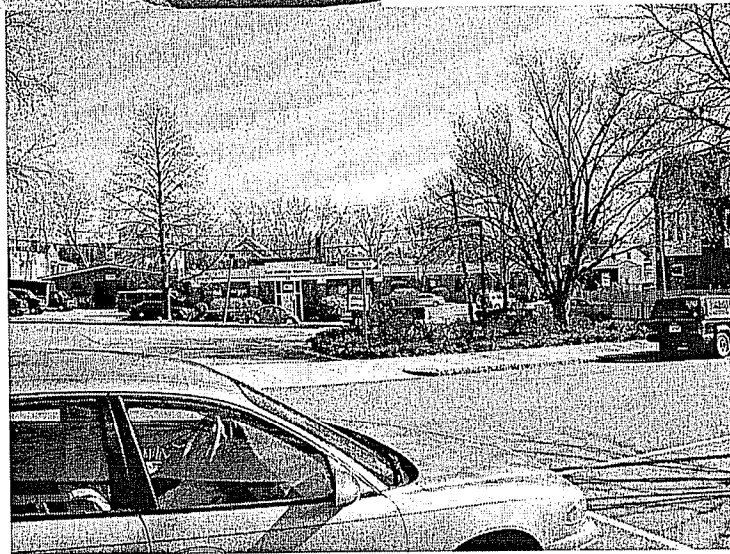
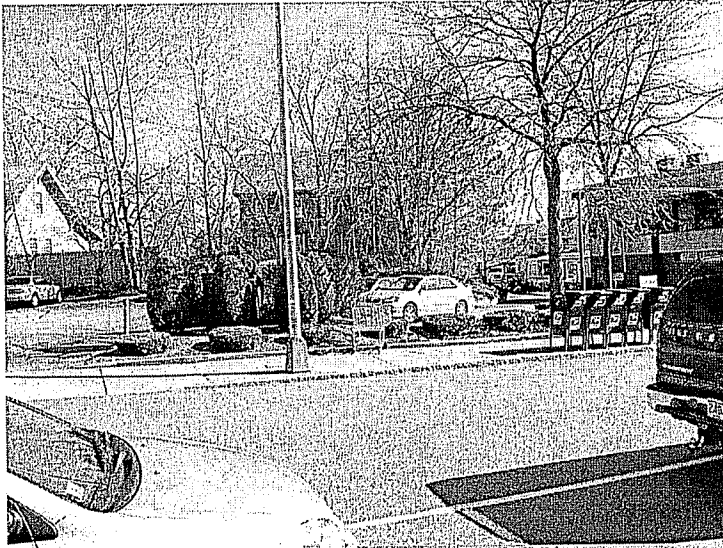
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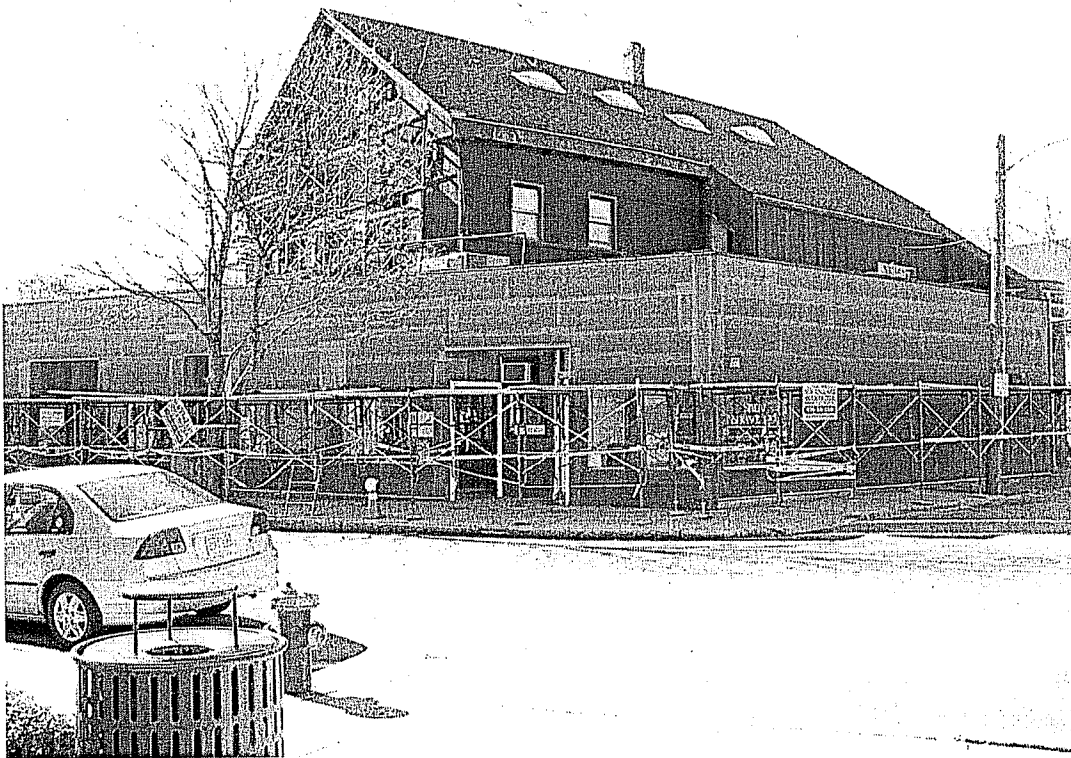
These institutional uses benefit downtown Reading by providing employment and daytime activity which provides customers for downtown businesses. However, their location and designs create a significant gap in the "Spine" that otherwise forms the core pedestrian experience. The buildings do not enliven the street. Ground floor windows are too small and do not provide interesting displays to passers-by. Deep setbacks, compounded by the elevation change create a "hole" in the streetscape in the lower photo. It will be difficult to retrofit these sites in the short-term, but development regulations and review processes should be used to ensure that these situations are not duplicated with new developments.

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One of the largest challenges to achieving a pedestrian-friendly and vibrant streetscape in downtown Reading are the surface parking lots that front directly on Haven Street. In the short-term property owners should be encouraged to significantly improve the variety and visual interest to the landscaping between the sidewalks and the lots. Over the longer-term, these sites provide potentially valuable locations for significant redevelopment which would increase the property value for the owner, tax revenues for the Town, and, most importantly, strengthen the vitality of the downtown.



This site is impressive for two reasons. First, the significant investment the owner is making in expanding and improving their property suggests that a strong market exists for commercial development in downtown Reading. Second, what appears to be an addition to an existing building, is transforming this property from an auto-oriented site design (a large building with deep setbacks) to a pedestrian-friendly downtown infill site design by bringing retail storefronts to the back of the sidewalk.





This is another great example of a well-designed new building in downtown Reading. The scale and site design are well-suited to a town center. The use mix and locations of those uses within the building, as well as how they are expressed architecturally work very well. Parking is provided behind and under the building, effectively addressing a practical need without disrupting the streetscape. This project, which appears to be fully occupied, is further evidence that a market exists for good urban design in downtown Reading and suggests that the EDC's vision of a highly-desirable walkable downtown is achievable.

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## Parking Management

The Master Plan and many other documents highlight a perceived shortage of parking as a detriment to downtown revitalization. As a result, there have been calls for studies of parking management downtown and exploration of the feasibility of constructing a new parking structure. Given the analysis of the market needed to support downtown above, and the stated desire for an improved downtown to become a quality of life amenity for all Reading residents, it is clear that parking will continue to be an important factor, as many downtown customers will need to drive to the downtown. However, it is also important to differentiate between issues that are perceived and those that are real and proscribe appropriate solutions accordingly.

### Proposed Parking Structure

The concept of a proposed parking structure appears to stem from both a perceived lack of parking today and a fear that available parking will not be sufficient to support additional development activity particularly if residential uses are introduced. However, the construction of structured parking is very expensive, with per space costs ranging from \$15,000 for a bare bones structure to well over \$20,000 depending on the complexity of the design, site constraints, and the size of the facility (smaller facilities generally cost more on a per space basis). The only state or federal grant funds that are generally available to support the construction of parking structures are usually tied to serving transit rather than economic development.

Reading's proposed site is an existing surface parking lot located in the center of the block bound by Main Street, Haven Street, Sanborn Street, and Woburn Street. This parcel is approximately one half acre in size, which is probably too small to provide sufficient land for an external "speed ramp" and retain a sufficiently-sized parking floor plate. The site is also less than 120 feet wide, the optimum width for a parking structure with an integral ramp. This width allows for two standard bays of perpendicular parking with a two-way drive lane between them. One bay is ramped and the other is level to allow drivers to circulate. These site constraints mean that construction of a new multi-level garage would probably be fairly expensive relative to the number of spaces created, despite the fact that a mid-block site would require only minimal architectural cladding. The topography may allow for a single elevated parking deck, accessed from Woburn Street over a surface lot accessed from Haven Street, but that proposal may be constrained by its impacts on adjacent properties and the need to take or obtain easements to cross private property to access the structure.

If a new parking structure is going to be both challenging to design and expensive to construct, the importance of evaluating the underlying assumptions behind the proposal. If funds are available for a feasibility study, I would strongly recommend that this study include an assessment of the demand for the facility and explore parking management alternatives in addition to looking at the design and finance issues associated with the proposed facility.

### Parking Demand and Supply

Since Downtown Reading is predominantly characterized by commercial uses and the residential uses in the district generally have off-street parking, demand for parking can reasonably be expected to peak during weekday afternoon business hours. During these periods, office and institutional buildings are

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occupied, retail stores and restaurants are open, and commuter rail users who left their vehicles in the morning have not yet returned from Boston.

The April Downtown tour discussed above occurred during this presumably peak parking demand period. However, photos taken during this tour show at least a dozen available spaces in the lot proposed for the garage, nearly as many available in the lot behind the Atlantic Market, and many on-street public spaces available along every street. In addition, several private parking lots serving non-residential uses were completely empty. The only location where demand appeared to meet or exceed available supply was at the train station.

The fact that the existing parking appears to adequately meet the existing demand does not specifically address the fear that additional development may upset this balance. A separate but related reason for considering structured parking is that if additional supply were introduced, it would be easier to convince private owners of property presently underutilized as surface parking to redevelop these sites.

Further and more detailed analysis as part of an alternatives analysis component to the parking structure feasibility study discussed above should address these questions more thoroughly. However, given the fact that much of the added development may be in the form of residential uses, whose peak parking demand complements the peak office and commuter demand that exists today, it is likely that the existing on and off-street public parking supply will be sufficient to support a substantial number of additional residential dwelling units even with no off-street parking requirements for those units.

A large proportion of the privately-owned surface parking spaces were also available during the site tour. As a result it is likely that incentive-based parking management strategies which incorporate shared use may allow for the redevelopment of many of these lots with no significant impact on the parking availability in Downtown Reading generally and for retail and restaurant customers specifically.

Various studies by the Institute of Transportation Engineers and others have demonstrated that in mixed-use areas that are not served by mass transit, the total actual parking demand, satisfied by both on-street and off-street parking, is generally between 1.5 and 2.5 spaces for every 1000 square feet of occupied development. At this standard, if Reading were to permit the development of new 3-story buildings, which maximized the lot coverage allowed by zoning on all of the undeveloped lots and surface parking lots along the spine outlined above, this would generate a new parking demand of 150 spaces in addition to the approximately 50 spaces in existing lots that would be displaced by new construction. The mid-day aerial photograph of Downtown Reading that is on Google Earth, shows at least 189 empty on- and off-street parking spaces within one half block of this same spine area. Nearly all of the real parking demand associated with the full build-out of the spine could potentially be accommodated without constructing a single new parking space. The addition of creative incentive-based parking management strategies could essentially guarantee that all of the parking demand could be accommodated.

### **Parking Management**

The transportation engineering firm Nelson/Nygaard Consulting Associates has been a leader in researching and promulgating parking management strategies

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that are based on viewing parking as an economic commodity rather than merely as public infrastructure. Considering parking a commodity resource allows for the introduction of incentive-based parking management systems which have proven to be particularly effective in addressing real and perceived parking shortages in many downtowns while also reducing traffic congestion and raising revenue for downtown maintenance and improvements.

The key to this process is to create a set of regulations and financial incentives and penalties which result in market-driven maintenance of a 10-15% vacancy rate in all public parking areas, particularly on-street, so customers recognize that there is always a space available. The revenue raised from the financial package can then be reinvested in improvements in the district that help with beautification and maintenance.

Some strategies that have been used successfully in communities like Pasadena, CA, Bellevue, WA, Cambridge, MA, Redwood City, CA, Boulder, CO, and Arlington, VA, as well as in major cities are listed below. Because they are generally based on creating market-driven economic management of parking, they all are most effective in areas where there are no or minimal parking requirements in zoning, as is the case in Downtown Reading.

- Commercial Parking Benefit Districts where parking-related revenue streams are spent solely on improvements within the commercial district served by the regulated parking. Revenue can come from meters that are priced to maintain the appropriate vacancy rate and clearly signed to let parkers know how the revenue will be spent. Such signage may allow community pride and recognition of the benefits to offset frustration with paying for parking.
- Require landlords to unbundle parking from commercial leases by charging extra rent for each parking space rather than including a fixed number of spaces in the base rent. This allows tenants to make a market-based decision about how much parking to rent and use and landlords to make a market-based decision about how much parking to build. San Francisco does this for residential rental property as well.
- Require parking cash-out programs, where employers must calculate the value of free parking that is provided to employees and make a payment to those employees who do not use the free parking because they walk, bicycle, take public transportation, or carpool to work.
- Instead of posting parking time limits for public parking, institute metered pricing with rates set at the market-determined level that ensures 10-15% vacancy. This system is often coupled with a validation process that allows free short-term parking for customers of businesses.
- Encourage sharing of privately-owned off-street parking among multiple complementary uses.
- Create a Residential Parking Benefit District in the neighborhoods adjacent to facilities that generate high parking demand. In Reading, the commuter rail station may be an example. Under such a system, people using the facility are charged for the right to park in the impacted neighborhood's streets at a rate that is set to allow for the appropriate level of vacancy. Revenue from the charges (through meters or permits as appropriate) is then reinvested in the benefit district to improve streets and sidewalks, plant trees, or do other public improvements that the residents desire.

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- End winter on-street parking bans that apply to downtown. Alternate approaches including snow emergency parking restrictions and odd/even parking could effectively allow for snow removal without eliminating on-street parking as a valuable source of parking supply, especially for mixed-use development.

These strategies may or may not be appropriate in Reading, but they and others like them should be explored as alternatives as part of any overall parking management strategy when reviewing the possibility of constructing a parking structure. Any proposed parking benefit district models would also need to be reviewed by Town Counsel to determine how they are allowed under Massachusetts General Law or if they would require a home rule petition.

## Business Improvement District

The policy statement by the Board of Selectmen that created the Economic Development Committee specifically proposes the exploration of a Business Improvement District (BID) for Downtown Reading. There are many benefits to the BID model and in many downtowns nationwide it has proven an effective means of promoting and improving commercial districts. BIDs are used to supplement general government services with additional programs that specifically benefit the BID area. Potential benefits include streetscape beautification programs, collective marketing, special event programming, refuse collection, maintenance programs, and economic development efforts. BID programming is financed through various means, the most common being a essentially a surcharge on property or business taxes, similar to the common area or condominium fees that are assessed in private shopping centers and malls to finance similar management, enhancement, and maintenance programs.

Massachusetts allows for the creation of BIDs under M.G.L. Chapter 40O. Unfortunately, this legislation has not been very effective due to the following clause in Section 4

Any property owner within the BID may, within thirty calendar days after such declaration of organization by the local municipal governing body, elect not to participate and not be subject to the BID fee.

This opt-out provision means that property owners may choose not to pay into the BID. Ostensibly the impact of this provision would be minimized by denying the BID benefits to those who choose not to participate, which may work for refuse collection programs or snow removal, but is hard to do when the BID wishes to fund physical improvements or area beautification. Once other property owners or businesses realize that one of their neighbors is not helping to pay for the hanging flower baskets that benefit everyone in the area, they too may choose not to participate, creating a cycle that undermines the funding structure for the BID. As a consequence, only three communities in Massachusetts have established BIDs with varying degrees of success.

Despite this flaw in the BID legislation, the concept is a very valuable one that could benefit Downtown Reading greatly. As a first step in evaluating a BID, the Economic Development Committee should meet with and survey potential participants to gauge both the level of interest in the program and the likelihood that some parties would opt out. If there is support but several key parties would probably not participate, Reading would have two options.

- A home rule petition could be filed allowing Reading to establish a BID without the opt-out provision. This may have an uphill battle because it is essentially imposing a local option tax, which could get caught up in the politics associated with other local option tax proposals currently being debated in the Legislature.
- Alternatively, different revenue sources could be identified to fund similar programs as those which would be paid for under a statutory BID and the BID could be adopted as an organizational and management vehicle without the special assessment. Options include the parking benefit district models discussed above and a 501(c)3 model supported by tax deductible donations.